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JAPANESE CHARACTER AND CHRISTIANITY

BY

TASUKU HARADA

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Japanese Character and Christianity

A Study of Japanese Ethical Ideals as Compared With Teachings of Christianity

By Tasuku Harada

If I were to state the chief characteristics of the Japanese people, looking at them from the ethical side I would say that there are especially four points which demand our attention. Without due appreciation of these we cannot understand the Japanese.

First, *Giri,* the Sense of Ought.

Giri is a term difficult of rendering into foreign languages. "Reasonable," "right," "justice," "ought," or the German *sollen,* are all inadequate translations. In most cases *giri* conflicts with *ninjo* (human affections, natural feelings). What moves the Japanese most in novels or in theatrical plays are those scenes in which the conflict between *giri* and *ninjo* is represented. "If you obey the dictates of the former, you can not obey the latter: if you obey the latter, you can not obey the former; standing between *giri* and *ninjo* (between duty and natural affection), there is nothing left but to weep." A passage like this moves the Japanese to tears. The scene in which Shigemori, of the Taira clan, remonstrates with his father upon his plan of violence against the emperor, is one of the finest passages in Japanese history: "If I am loyal, I can not be filial; if I am filial, I can not be loyal; here is my sore dilemma." This is an example of the conflict between *giri* and *ninjo.*

But, as according to the Japanese saying, "the most sacred relations must give way before great duties," so when duty demands, the relation between father and son ceases to be; everything must be sacrificed on the altar of duty. One's own interests or welfare can not be taken into consideration. *Giri* includes the spirit of chivalry and self-sacrifice. A man who does not acknowledge these principles is despised as a man devoid of the sense of *giri.*

> Full well I knew this course must end in death;
> It was Yamato-spirit urged me on
> To dare whate'er betide.*

This verse we may well consider as expressing the sense of *giri* applied to patriotism.

Such words as these of the Apostle Paul: "For I wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh," while hard to understand on utilitarian principles, are readily understood from the standpoint of *giri.* Words also like these of Christ: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me," when considered in the light of the principle I have stated before, that "the most sacred relations must give way before great duties," are wholly natural.

The life of Christ is an example of the victory of *giri* over *ninjo.*

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* Translation taken from "Bushido," by Dr. Nitobe.

The temptations of Satan were all addressed to the natural feelings of Christ as a man; but Christ, discerning clearly what duty demanded, overcame them. Again, when Christ prayed: "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me," He gave expression to his natural feelings; but when He added "nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt," He conquered them by His sense of duty. This is an explanation which, I think, is readily understood by the Japanese. Such theological statements as that the cross of Christ is an atonement, offered up for the appeasing of God's wrath, find very reluctant acceptance from the Japanese. But if we explain the cross from the standpoint of self-sacrifice, it presents no special difficulty to them. There is not a Japanese whose admiration is not aroused when hearing of Sakura-Sogoro of Shimosa, who took his life in his hands and went to the cross for the sake of his neighbors. They admire his loyalty to his sense of duty. Looked at from this standpoint, though the cross may be a "stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks," it is not so to the Japanese.

Second, *Ho-on,* the Sense of Gratitude.

I remember being frequently taught as a child that to be ungrateful is to be brutish. Even among animals the dog remembers a kindness, while the cat is considered with less favour because it has little or no gratitude. Buddhism teaches "the four blessings," viz., the blessings of parents, of one's country, of the people at large, of Buddha; to be thankful for these is the duty of man. To show gratitude for blessings received is a teaching common to Shintoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. We have it impressed upon us from childhood that there is nothing so base as ingratitude.

One reason why the Japanese have opposed Christianity is that they have mistakenly thought that it makes light of the favours and mercies which we receive from rulers and parents. If they would understand its real teachings regarding gratitude to God, they would gladly accept them. But to teach them that, if they do not believe in God they will receive punishment, while if they believe they will be rewarded, has no influence whatever over them; nay, rather it arouses in their minds strong opposition.

> If but my heart is in accord with truth,
> Though suppliant hands I do not raise to heaven,
> The gods will not refuse me their protection.

This will be the answer of a Japanese to such teaching. But if they are taught that the chief purpose of prayer is to express our gratitude to God, and that to walk in the way of righteousness is to requite the favours of heaven, there is not one who will fail to understand such teaching.

Fukuzawa-Yukichi, a leader of modern education, severely criticized Kaibara-Ekken (1630-1714) on account of his teaching regarding women. But while Fukuzawa's merit is great for diffusing the ideas of Western civilization during the Meiji era, that of Kaibara-Ekken is not less for diffusing the moral ideas of Confucianism in a way easily comprehended. And books like Kaibara's "Ten Precepts," or "The Great Teaching for Women" were esteemed by the people of the pre-Meiji era as their Bible. In the writings of Kaibara we find the fol-

lowing passage: "Man receives his life from heaven and earth; thus he secures from them unlimited blessings, as from father and mother; not only is he born through the mercy of heaven and earth, but his whole life is sustained by them, even as after his birth through his parents he is nourished by them, and thus grows up to manhood; so also, after having been born into this world, he is constantly to think how to serve heaven and earth, and how to requite their favours; this is to serve them with a filial spirit." There is scarcely a single Japanese, I think, who does not agree with these words. Of course, by "heaven and earth" Kaibara means the Supreme Being who is the ruler of them. That he had no clear idea of a heavenly Father is, of course, true. But his idea is that if man derives his life from the Supreme Being, it is but natural that he should serve Him. It is worthy of our attention that these words of the Confucian teacher of two hundred years ago closely resemble those of the Bible.

Third, *Renketsu,* the Spirit of Disinterestedness.

Renketsu is a term expressing the opposite of "covetousness," "greed," "love of money." Of course, every nation values this spirit, but it is not too much to say that there is no nation where it is held in as high esteem as by the Japanese. We have the saying: "The true gentleman does not think about his own advantage," and this spirit formerly went to the extreme of considering the mere handling of money degrading. In the age of feudalism, for example, the saying was, that "even though the warrior has nothing to eat, he uses a long tooth-pick,"* and so, even when hungry, he was ashamed in any way to act as if soliciting a favour. And this spirit existed not only among the warrior-class, but among all classes down to the common day labourer.

Through ignorance of this characteristic foreigners frequently err in their treatment of the Japanese. Japanese engaged in public works especially dislike to speak of their salaries. To be asked: "How much is your salary?" is considered by such a man an insult. Here lies a difference between the Japanese and the Chinese. Among the latter, even among the refined class, it is not considered discourteous to inquire about the salary and age of a person though of slight acquaintance.

When at the time of the restoration, before the complete abolition of the feudal system, three hundred *diamyo* passed over their ancestral estates to the Imperial Government without reluctance, it was indeed an unprecedented act. It was an event unparalleled in the history of the world. Anyone not understanding the spirit of the Japanese can scarcely appreciate such an incident.

Some years ago I went with a friend from America to see Count Okuma's garden. We were shown around most politely by a young man attached to the count's house. As we were about to leave, my friend handed to the young man a small amount of money without first wrapping it in paper. * * The young man considered this very strange, while I felt sorry for him. I explained to him, that, as it was customary in other countries to give a fee to guides, my friend, not knowing the customs of this country, had acted accordingly. I therefore apologised

* i.e., even in poverty the warrior does not forget his dignity.

** This refers to the polite custom in Japan of wrapping a fee or any gift in paper, before presenting it.

for him, and took back the money. When I explained the matter to my friend, he, in his turn, thought it exceedingly strange. It was a point where Eastern and Western ideas differ.

It is to be greatly regretted, that, together with ideas of Western civilization, the "almighty-dollar" idea is spreading more and more in our land. But the conviction that "while a man lives but one generation, his name lives unto all generations," is still the great motive ruling the Japanese. Several years ago a whole family of the *samurai* class in Kumamoto died of hunger. They considered it unbecoming and cowardly to ask for aid, and so they lay down and died together. But in the alcove of their room, it is said, stood intact a box with a splendid set of armour.

No doubt this high sense of honor, if misused, may degenerate into hypocrisy; but the *samurai's* sense of honor was in itself certainly beautiful. If developed in the right direction, its possessor is not far removed from him who is "poor in spirit"—who is "persecuted for righteousness' sake."

Fourth, *Chuko,* the Virtue of Loyalty and of Filial Piety.

That this has exerted a very great influence in Japanese thought is too well known to need demonstration anew. To-day, it is true, these two ideas are apt to be degraded by mere outward observance, and not a few evil practices result therefrom. This is in consequence of carrying to an extreme the esteem in which they are held, and of applying them mistakenly. But certainly loyalty and filial piety, as such, are not wrong. To-day they are yet the greatest inspiration to millions of Japanese. They are closely related to the spirit of gratitude of which I have spoken before.

"Even though the master fall short of his duties as master, the servant must not fall short of his duty as servant; even though parents fall short of their duties as parents, the child must not fall short in his." Loyalty and filial piety demand from us nothing short of complete surrender of ourselves to our master or parents. It is the spirit of not living unto one's self, but unto our superiors. The *samurai* considered it a matter of course that he should fall fighting in front of his lord's horse. It was his firm conviction that his life was not his own.

As an illustration of the education of a *samurai,* let me give you an account of it in Kagoshima. The people of Kagoshima were accustomed to foster among themselves a spirit of utter disregard of death. When a boy had grown to the age of seven or eight, his father or elder brother or any one standing in place of them, would ask him without giving any further reason: "Are you ready to die for your lord and for your father?" The boy then would reply in the same frank manner, as if making a sacred pledge: "I am ready to die; I am ready to die!" But even among the bold and daring Satsuma *samurai* were some weak-spirited boys who did not reply thus promptly. Their father, or brother, then would expostulate with them and even beat them until they gave their pledge. Looked at in the light of today this was a barbarous custom; but it is evident that there was something in the education of a *samurai* that was closely akin to a religious spirit.

The superiority of the Japanese soldiers in the war with China is

not explained merely by the fact that they had superior arms and were more thoroughly disciplined. Every one acquainted with the facts will say that it was because of the spirit of loyalty in their breasts.

We may well say that the spirit of the ancient *bushi* in his relation to his lord was essentially the same as that expressed in the apostle's words: "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself; for whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord, whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord's." The essential spirit can not differ; there can only be a higher or lower, a nobler or a less noble object of attachment. If this spirit is developed by the spirit of Christianity it will become towards God the spirit of loyalty and of filial devotion, and towards man that spirit of benevolence which gives itself for the welfare of mankind. Jesus Christ said: "I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill." Christianity, I believe, will develop such virtues, ennoble them, lead them on to perfection.

According to what I have said so far we may conclude that in looking on the ethical side of Japanese character there are, instead of many points of opposition, many points of close contact to Christianity. But if we ask again in what respects the Japanese offer opposition to the Gospel, we will have to reply that the points of opposition are found along intellectual and philosophical lines. Chief among these are the following three, of which I will speak but briefly:

First, the Japanese are inclined to Positivism, and consequently to Anti-Supernaturalism. Speaking in a general way, Japanese nature is not fertile soil for pure philosophy. It has produced many men of the type of Aristotle or Franklin, but scarcely any of that of Plato, Kant, or Hegel. Buddhism has flourished in Japan, but the most eminent men among Buddhist believers, men like Nichiren, Kobo, Shinran, have in every case been eminent for their qualities of religious statesmanship. The sects which these men founded have spread widely among the Japanese, while more erudite and mystical sects like the *Tendai* or *Kegon,* have never found a large following. And a world-view like that influenced by Confucianism, which says: "we do not know what life is, how can we know what death is," has the greatest influence among the middle and upper classes. In Confucianism itself the *Shushi* school, which keeps closer to realities, has had by far greater influence than the more philosophically inclined *Yomei* school. It is, of course, true that in the religious ideas and customs of former ages much superstition intermingled. There was much talk about mysterious supernatural beings and strange powers. However, with the coming of Western scientific thought this has readily and entirely disappeared. This is in consequence of the positivistic tendencies of Japanese character.

It is, therefore, exceedingly difficult to explain to the Japanese the supernatural element in Christianity. The miracles are for them not a proof in favour of the Gospel, but rather a stumbling block.

Secondly, the Japanese are Pantheists. It is a well-known fact that Buddhism is pantheistic. Shintoism also is pantheistic. We may say, therefore, the Japanese are deficient in the sense of personality. They speak about "heaven" or "the way," or "truth," but they do not

possess the conception of a personal Heavenly Father. This is an entirely new thought.

Again, Japanese thought is greatly deficient in the Christian conceptions of righteousness and sin; rather the principle has become prevalent that, for the sake of accomplishing one's purpose, it is proper to use cunning expedients, or pious frauds. The criticism of Canon Barnett some years ago that there is no fifty-first Psalm in all Japanese literature is correct. No doubt it is true that such a pantheistic tendency is of advantage in the explanation of some Christian doctrines, but at the same time it presents many obstacles. If we wish to establish Christian theism both firmly and widely, we must begin at the very foundation.

Third, as a result of these positivistic and pantheistic tendencies Fatalism has a powerful influence over the Japanese. This is the reason why at times the daring courage and recklessness of the Japanese cool so quickly. The Japanese, on the whole, dislike an excess that tends to offend good taste in anything: for example, in the colouring of any object of art they do not like loud colours and in their food they prefer articles of plain and delicate flavour.

Isles of blest Japan!
Should your Yamato spirit
Strangers seek to scan,
Say, scenting morn's sun-lit air,
Blows the cherry wild and fair! *

While this spirit is certainly beautiful, it has its defects. Thus, the Japanese readily gives up and says *shikata ga nai* (there is no help for it); or when fighting against some enemy, he again very quickly makes peace. To fight to the bitter end, even in the cause of righteousness, is not his strong characteristic. Therefore he can willingly sacrifice himself. But to take care of himself, and be faithful until his time of death comes, nay, more, to cherish the noble hope of eternal life, this spirit I believe, is lacking in Japanese character.

In the above presentation of Japanese character I have not tried to speak in detail of the causes that have shaped it. However, among these we have to reckon the influence exerted by Shintoism, Buddhism and Confucianism which are too well known to need special mention. There is no doubt that the social institutions of Japan have also greatly influenced it, and I believe that the natural characteristics and the scenery of our country have likewise contributed much.

In short, accepting Japanese character as I have briefly outlined it, we can say that on its ethical side it offers points of contact to Christianity, and even welcomes it, while on the other hand, on its intellectual side it offers many obstacles. Unfortunately the sense of duty, of disinterestedness, and the other noble virtues of which I have spoken, have been greatly impaired by contact with materialistic civilization.

Has Christianity the power to revive them and breathe into them new life? Has it the power to develop the ancient, ethical conceptions towards still nobler and loftier ideals, and thus to perfect them? For the answer we should await the time when we shall have more completely observed the influence of the new religion upon the ethico-religious development of the nation.

* Translation taken from "Bushido."